

majority of respondents indicated a dual role as call taker and telecommunicator. So after walking an irate caller through the worst day of their life, the employee now has to possibly send a co-worker into harm's way while not forgetting to answer the next call.

Many of the respondents (89%) indicated that they had to change their emotions consistently and (98%) had to manage the emotions of others. They also stated that this emotional management was a critical part and requirement of their jobs (98%).

COMPASSION

I measured responses on how respondents felt about doing their job and the effects it has on them. This section clearly showed that we have staff (75%) that are happy with their jobs helping others and (97%) truly believe they're making a difference. They overwhelmingly (97%) get satisfaction from helping people.

But as the numbers indicate, job satisfaction is coming at a cost to their health as 32% indicated losing sleep over one or more traumatic victims they have helped. The ability to separate their personal lives from their lives as a helper was found to be difficult by 52%. A section of respondents (31%) stated that they have intrusive or frightening thoughts as a result of their jobs as helpers. A majority (83%) stated that they felt some level of exhaustion with their work. One response that hit close to home was that 30% stated they avoid situations because they might remind them of a frightening experience involving a person they have helped.

A trend that is growing in our industry is line-level peer groups. Like the name indicates, these groups are made up of fellow telecommunicators who are trained to immediately respond to the floor and help co-workers through difficult situations. In the past, our field responders addressed these issues with critical stress debriefings that usually excluded telecommunicators. I can actually remember being told that I didn't need to attend because I wasn't on scene. In my survey, 65% stated that they have never attended a critical stress debrief, but they also indicated (80%) feeling comfortable speaking with peers and 40% stated they had calls that they wish they could have discussed with a peer person. This seems to be a strong path to follow in supporting our telecommunicators.

Emotional & stress indicated questions	Indicated some type of effect	68%
	Indicated no type of effect	32%

Figure 2

In closing, I was relieved to see that our industry is maturing in its diversity at all levels. Earlier in the demographics section, I asked if hiring an older workforce would indicate better coping skills with life experience. The final results didn't reveal evidence of that, and since my finding almost mirrored the prior studies, it would indicate that life experience has very little impact on managing the stress of a telecommunicator. We are seeing a lot of changes in technology, which will only present more challenges, human resources and peer acknowledgment.

However, there is a slow but positive shift to understanding stress in our industry. Acceptance by leadership, field personnel and the public that the same stressors affecting scene responders does in fact affect PSTs needs to continue. In most cases, the exposure to these stressors is compounded by call volume and repetitiveness without healthy coping skills. As an industry, we can't develop and implement programs like EAPs and then let them sit on a shelf collecting dust. This type of failure is made evident with 24% of respondents not knowing if they even had a program.

In my own observation, with almost 25 years in public safety serving as a deputy sheriff, EMT and public safety telecommunicator, I have to say some of the most difficult memories to shake have come from my time as a PST. From the findings of this survey, I believe my personal observations share something with most of the respondents as shown in figure 2, with 70% of them indicating being emotionally affected by their jobs as helpers. This number alone shows we need to do much more, sooner rather than later.

This article is an overview of my research and hopefully sheds light on the fact that much more work needs to be done to help our first responders. As I stated previously, my goal was to reproduce the results of the two earlier studies here in New Jersey and to ask if we are doing enough to help.

The good news is "I did it," unfortunately the BAD news is "I did it." The results

show that telecommunicators in my home state are being impacted from their work as helpers, and, although the prior studies are several years old, the change is less than expected. As leaders at all levels, we need to continue to work with our people, accept the reality of our jobs and improve as an industry. If we don't, who will?

What I would like for everyone to take away from this study though is you're not alone, and it's OK to ask for help. ●

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